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Blashfield's "Washington Surrendering His Commission"

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Gift
Theodor Marburg.
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IN October, 1899, the Municipal Art Society of Baltimore offered the city five thousand dollars to provide a mural decoration for the courthouse on condition that the city expend ten thousand dollars for two similar decorations. This offer was accepted in 1901.

The Municipal Art Society and the Courthouse Commission, which latter body was charged with the expenditure of the money appropriated by the city, thereupon appointed the following joint committee to procure the decorations: Theodore Marburg, John N. Steele, J. B. Noel Wyatt, Henry D. Harlan, Ferdinand C. Latrobe and Frank N. Hoen.

The first decoration completed was Calvert's Treaty With the Indians, painted by C. Y. Turner, and placed in the lobby of the criminal court.

The following pages record the proceedings attending the unveiling of the decoration in the court of common pleas February 9, 1903, the second decoration completed.

Address of

Theodore Marburg

THE decoration about to be unveiled is but a feature added to the beauty and dignity of a fine building. Only because the architects had in mind just such noble adornment as this, is it now possible for us to place it here. The painter works to disadvantage unless the architect has consciously provided opportunity for him. Such opportunity is not lacking for making the Baltimore courthouse one of the noted buildings of the world. We start with pure and beautiful lines of architecture, and find within the courthouse spaces for a series of decorations which it might well take many years to provide. Blashfield brings his tribute in these words: "The dignified restraint shown in the interior architecture of the courthouse is particularly helpful and even inspiring to a mural painter, who feels that such handsome rooms demand very serious decorative treatment."

Art is one of the mediums of expression for the aspirations of a people, and some of the great monuments of art are regarded today as among the most notable achieve-

ments of a famous epoch or race. An inferior people has seldom produced a superior work of art. There seems to have been required a stimulus to the national pulse, some achievement indicating purpose in a people, before they produced anything notable in the field of art. We each follow our separate walk in life and are inclined to think that our ideas and acts are all our own. The history of the great art creations, equally with performance in other directions, proves that we are but factors, after all, helping to express a great municipal, national or world purpose.

Now, what is it we emphasize in the achievements of a people? When we read the story of Athens it is not so much the quantity of silver taken from her mines, nor her commerce with Phoenicia and with her own colonies, which we dwell upon, though the material wealth they provided paved the way for her later achievements. Her real performance of lasting value was her glowing heroism and what she contributed to philosophy, politics and art. The names of her leading thinkers are as familiar after the lapse of two thousand years as the names of our contemporaries. We travel many miles to see her temples and the beautiful mar-

bles which came from the hand of Phidias and of Praxiteles. Just so with the city states of a later age. The trade of Florence with the Levant, together with that of neighbor cities, was an important factor in bringing about the revival of letters and the general awakening of Europe. But these are not the things we connect today with the name of Florence. The mention of her name brings to our minds the fiery genius of her great priest Savonarola, who met a painful martyrdom as courageously as he had met the ordinary trials of life. It brings before us a Dante, who stamped his personality upon the literature of Europe; a Benvenuto Cellini, who wrought with such exquisite taste the ornaments and the smaller objects of art that are treasured today by our museums. It brings up the group of great Florentine painters and the heroic stature of a Michael Angelo who felt the kinship of painting, sculpture, architecture and literature, and whose genius was broad enough to span them all.

Our starting point, when we try to give to our children a conception of our own early history, is ever the spirit of resistance to oppression that brought the Pilgrims across the stormy Atlantic in a craft such as few passengers would today risk their

lives in. When we come to our own State, that which we try to emphasize in her early history is her religious tolerance, and later the part her citizens took in fulfilling their duty as men in the Continental Army and the Continental Congress, and in the convention which evolved from a bitter experience our wise federal constitution. We remember with satisfaction that within our borders occurred the event of universal significance portrayed in this decoration.

Posterity properly estimates our performances according to the influence they have had in directing the endeavors of men toward right-thinking and right-living.

Our phenomenal growth in industry and agriculture, made possible largely by transportation, is the striking fact of the last century, and its advantages to men and to civilization cannot be over-estimated. But was not this very progress determined by mental forces? Would we occupy the position we occupy today had we remained a dependency of England? Would we have made such progress had our progenitors failed to establish a form of government which made possible the workings of a broad democratic spirit, the spirit which has brought the best to the top, and

led men to endeavor, so that our land attracted from Europe thousands who felt the need of opportunity? The framers of our constitution and the men who rocked the cradle of the new nation, our first law-makers, administrators and judges, had a consciousness of this, and wrought as few statesmen had ever wrought before.

Advance of industry should be valued principally because it sets free the activities of men for pursuits other than those of mere sustenance.

Baltimore is a great manufacturing and trading centre today, but those of you who have traveled much must have felt some little shock at the small knowledge of our city possessed by the outside world. Outside the great seaports abroad, Baltimore is known best as the home of the Johns Hopkins University and the Johns Hopkins Hospital. Men who did not know of us before know of us now. It is the things born of the mind, things which increase the spiritual stature of men, that excite the admiration of the contemporary world and that live in history.

How many travelers are drawn to Milan by the faded picture on the moldering walls of a barnlike room? Beauty of color no longer exists and the chipping of the

surface has left the picture indistinct; but the spirit of religion is there and the genius of the painter is there, shining out through the veil which four hundred years have drawn across its face. Tenderly men copy it and reproduce it. Only a short while ago there was placed in First Independent Christ's Church, here in Baltimore, a glass mosaic of much beauty which draws its motive from it. That painting of Leonardo da Vinci is thus a living influence today in art and religion.

The decoration which Edwin H. Blashfield has given us here touches a high theme in the world of politics. How many leaders, inspired by enlightened patriotism at the beginning of their career, have marred their work by proving incapable of resisting the temptations of power! And how different our destiny, and that of many other lands whose course has been influenced by our own, had Washington proved equally weak! Wendell Phillips says of him: "There were scores of men a hundred years ago who had more intellect than Washington. He outlives and overrides them all by the influence of his character."

The act which this painting portrays illustrates pre-eminently this moral strength

of the man. It was the crowning act of devotion to the cause that owed so much to him. The event occurred on December 23rd, 1783. Washington had asked Congress, in session at Annapolis, whether it desired him to tender his resignation in writing or in person. Congress expressed a preference for the latter course. The committee of arrangements for the day was composed of Jefferson of Virginia, Gerry of Massachusetts and McHenry of Maryland. State and Government officials thronged the House, and many ladies were present. Members remained in their seats with hats on, after the fashion of the mother country; others stood uncovered. The tall figure of Washington wore its usual air of dignity and composure as he delivered the short address conveying his resignation as Commander-in-Chief of the army. Mifflin, the President of Congress, replied, and the ceremony was at an end.

This simple but significant event bears out the observation that "character is centrality, the impossibility of being displaced or overset." We know that a discontented army was anxious to set Washington upon a throne. In the light of this knowledge, we can appreciate the nobility of soul here displayed and the consequences with which

the step was fraught. Such an act on the part of such a man has had, and will continue to have, a profound influence throughout our history, and the painting before us, which interprets it so beautifully, will add measurably to the knowledge of the deed among men.

Emerson, after his fashion of extreme statement, but with his customary plunge for a fundamental truth, exclaims, "A ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world."

But painting has an eloquence equally with the written page. It may stand for more than beauty alone. This representation of one of the most notable events in our history, probably the most memorable single act of our foremost man, will help inculcate loftier ideals. In Washington we find a man who was actually governed by the principles of conduct by which most of us either aim to be governed or feel that we ought to be governed. Right action is far-reaching in its influence. A striking deed, even on the part of the humblest, which bears the stamp of true manhood appeals to us in a singular way and gives us a peculiar pleasure. How much greater its influence when it comes from such a figure as Washington! The essayist al-

ready quoted asks: "Is there any religion but this, to know that, wherever in the wide desert of being the holy sentiment we cherish has opened into a flower, it blooms for me? If none sees it, I see it; I am aware, if I alone, of the greatness of the fact."

We will come to realize, if we do not now realize, that Blashfield has pictured this great event in a great way. He has preferred to touch it with allegory rather than transcribe the actual scene. The decoration is admittedly one of the best productions of this serious artist, and the Baltimore courthouse will be known to an additional number of men as the home of Blashfield's Washington.

It is becoming at this point to dwell briefly on the personality of the man who has given us this painting.

Edwin Howland Blashfield was born in the last days of 1848 (December 15), in the City of New York. He attended the Boston Latin School, and gave up going to Harvard in order to have more time abroad for the study of art. In May, 1867, he went to Paris and became a pupil of Bonnat. Some twenty years were passed on the other side of the water, mostly in Paris and Italy, two visits being paid to

Egypt and one to Greece. His most important paintings are:

Dome of Library of Congress—"The Evolution of Civilization." It will be interesting to note what the beautiful figures in this decoration stand for: Egypt represents earliest written records; India, religion; Greece, philosophy; Rome, administration; Islam, physics; Middle Ages, modern languages; Italy, the fine arts; Germany, printing; Spain, discovery; England, literature; America, science.

Lantern Crown—Figures representing "The Human Understanding Looking Upward from Finite to Infinite Progress."

Panel, the Court of Appeals, New York—"The Power of the Law."

Lunette, Bank of Pittsburg—"Pittsburg Offering Her Steel and Iron to the Commerce of the World."

Panel, Lawyers' Club, New York—"Justice."

Boardroom, Newark—"Foresight and Moderation, Thrift and Industry Lead the People to Security."

In co-operation with his wife he has written two volumes on Italian cities and magazine articles. In his opinion, the most exacting piece of work he ever did was the editing and annotating (with Mrs. Blashfield and A. A. Hopkins) of seventy lives of Italian painters from Vasari. This

took three of them three years and Blashfield is not anxious to undertake anything of the kind again.

As his modesty has led him to absent himself from this ceremony we are free to dwell upon the fine sensibilities and high ideals that reveal themselves in personal intercourse with him. He has all the spirit of devotion to his calling which marks the true artist. His first proposition was to make simply a central panel, but he appreciated our desire to have the initial decorations of the courthouse important, and speedily consented to this more ambitious undertaking without additional remuneration.

It is with considerable satisfaction that the committee, Mr. Mayor, turns over to you this second of the decorations which it was charged with the duty of procuring.

Turner's representation of Calvert's Treaty With the Indians in the lobby of the criminal court is eminently successful. His generous fellow artist, who is himself an art critic of acknowledged standing, writes concerning it: "I want to congratulate you on the admirable way in which Turner's decoration fits and suits its place in the courthouse. It goes like a ball in a pocket. The color looks rich and absolutely suited

to its surroundings, while the whole decoration is just upon the right plane."

If now we approve of what has been done, let us go on, gentlemen, until we have provided our courthouse with the best that brush and chisel can produce and have made it one of the notable buildings of the world. Much smaller and poorer communities than our own have done much greater things, and what is projected is quite within our reach. There is an awakening in the field of art in America and American talent can well be drawn upon liberally for this purpose; but if we set out to produce something notable, no narrow spirit of patronizing home talent must be allowed to hamper us. In the courthouse, as in the city at large, whenever a work of art is projected, the sole aim should be to get, not the best that America can supply, but the best that the world can supply. If that spirit prevails, we shall achieve something memorable, and the presence of great creations of art among us will do more eventually to stimulate local production along right lines than any provincialism practiced now, or in the future, could do.

Such things as the decoration before you lend dignity to every one of us as

citizens. Furthermore, if we succeed in making our courthouse what the Municipal Art Society hopes to make it—a treasure-house of art—it will not only attract to Baltimore many visitors, the benefits of whose presence must be manifest, but it will promote good citizenship by increasing civic pride.

Our progenitors were in many ways pluckier men than we. When we see the buildings erected in the early days, canals, railways and roads constructed, and wars undertaken, and compare their resources with our own, this truth is borne in upon us. As our communities grow larger, we lose touch with each other, and lose the stimulus that comes from the consciousness of a common interest. The added wealth of society today presents, not added possibilities, but multiplied possibilities because of the surplus. Were we in Baltimore correspondingly as public-spirited and as enterprising as the men who built the Washington Monument, and constructed the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the Baltimore of today would be as handsome as Edinburgh, and, as a mart, as important as New York. The foresight of the statesmen who constructed the Erie Canal con-

tributed much toward establishing the supremacy of New York on the Atlantic seaboard. Situation is, of course, an important factor, but primarily it is men, and not things, which determine what a place shall be.

Letter of

Edward Howland Blashfield

Describing the Decoration

The following letter was read by Judge Henry D. Harlan:

New York, January 5th, 1903.

To the President of the
Municipal Art Society of Baltimore.

Dear Sir:—I should like to thank the Baltimoreans through you for giving me so sympathetic a commission as to place, since a clear vertical wall space of thirty-five feet by twelve offers an unusual opportunity. I am also greatly obliged to the committee on selection of subject for having chosen one which lent itself so well to representation. In regard to my treatment of the subject, may I say that I have very gladly availed myself of the committee's permission to treat it symbolically rather than historically? The first duty of a mural painter is to look after the *artistic* presentation of his subject. Its literary or story-telling side comes distinctly afterwards, although *immediately*. He must first see to it that his picture is a real decoration, that is to say, good in the *pattern* of its lines and masses and colors, and then he may think about his story.

That is why the semi-symbolical, semi-historical treatment is more grateful to the

artist than the wholly historical; the former is more suited to the exigencies of decoration.

In the present case Washington is supposed to be laying his commission as General-in-Chief at the feet of an enthroned figure of Columbia, bearing sword and cuirass, and wearing the Phyrgian bonnet (the liberty-cap). Opposite Washington, dressed in the colors of the State, is a female figure representing the Commonwealth of Maryland. Behind are War sheathing her sword and Resistance to Oppression breaking a rod. Seated below on the step is a figure of History. Behind Washington, as following naturally upon the proclamation of peace, are Prosperity, with the horn of plenty, and Commerce, bearing the caduceus. In the left panel are officers of artillery, infantry and cavalry, and troops presenting arms. In the right panel are a magistrate, an officer of the allied French forces, and various officers of the Continental Army. In both panels the corners are closed and supported by figures of women and children.

In returning to the fact that the treatment is symbolical, not historical, it is hardly necessary to say that Columbia and the Goddess of War, Prosperity, Com-

merce and the rest were not present at the ceremony, but were (with the sanction of the committee on subject) invited to appear because they were more decorative than would have been a row of men seated side by side or behind their desks.

To repeat, in a few words, the decorative conditions have been considered first, but at the same time it has been my endeavor to be clear in telling the story.

Again thanking you and those you represent, I am,

Yours very sincerely,

Edwin Howland Blashfield.

Response of

Honorable Thomas G. Hayes

Mayor of Baltimore

IT affords me pleasure, as Mayor of Baltimore, to receive this work of art, representing an historical fact which occurred nearly one hundred and twenty years ago in the room of a building which still stands on the soil of Maryland.

There could be no more pleasing and profitable method than this of presenting to the human mind and heart one of the many important historical facts which occurred in a memorable epoch of this grand old commonwealth.

The fact that Maryland has preserved and now owns the building in a room of which, on December 23rd, 1783, General George Washington, fresh from his victories, the treaty of peace not yet signed, surrendered his commission to the Continental Congress, is a fact of which all Marylanders may well be proud. And now to have that event presented in a beautiful and artistic mural painting, adds pleasure to our pride.

There could be no subject more suited to a legitimate exercise of the highest art than Washington surrendering his commission. George Washington, coming from the field of victory, where under his leadership, with dictatorial power conferred

in this city, he was the principal agency in bringing into existence a new nation, arrives at Annapolis to surrender this power to the Congress which conferred it. The following day he writes to Governor Curtain, "I hope to spend the remainder of my days in cultivating the affection of good men and the practice of domestic virtues." Can any one doubt that this event is a subject worthy of the display of the highest art?

Reflection upon such a hero, in connection with such an event, should readily inspire the artist to conceive a painting of the first order, a painting which would tell this thrilling story with effect, the story of the final act in the military career of him who was "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

We have all that could be wished in yonder beautiful mural painting. It gives in appropriate grouping of figures, with pleasing colors, lights and shades, this important historical event as a mural decoration, to be looked upon by the present generation, as well as by generations to come, as long as stand the walls of this magnificent temple of justice.

This handsome painting but makes us want more of Maryland's early history

displayed on these walls. And more we must have. That great event, the proclamation of religious liberty, as well as other of the many important events which have occurred in the history of Maryland should be represented in appropriate allegorical paintings to be placed upon these walls.

I shall be glad always to co-operate with my fellow citizens, especially with the Municipal Art Society, in the attainment of this much desired end.

In receiving this painting for the people of Baltimore, permit me to thank the artist, the Municipal Art Society and the Courthouse Commission for their valuable service to Baltimore in accomplishing the ornamentation of the walls of this building by such a painting. As the people of our city behold it and think upon the event it represents, their thanks will be repeated as long as this beautiful decoration shall last.

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